

## **The Use of Commissive Speech Acts and Its Politeness Implication: A Case of Banten Gubernatorial Candidate Debate**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study entitled “The Use of Commissive Speech Acts and its Politeness Implication: A Case of Banten Gubernatorial Candidates Debate” examines the use of commissive speech acts in the Banten gubernatorial candidate debate and the realization of politeness in the use of the speech acts. This study is largely qualitative, supported by some descriptive quantification. Data were collected by downloading the debate from relevant websites. The data analysis was based on Searle’s (1979) classification of speech acts and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness. It is found that commissive speech acts were mostly realized through guarantee (53.7%), followed by promise (38.9%), and refusal (7.4%). It is also found that in terms politeness, all the candidates appear to behave in relatively the same way. This seems to result from the weightiness which is not largely different and the candidates’ consideration that the panelists and other candidates are only media to speak to a party that has the ultimate power, i.e. the people of Banten.

**Keywords:** *Speech Acts, Commissive Speech Acts, Politeness*

## 1. Introduction

In November 2011 Banten people had to choose their governor for 2012-2017 period and all the gubernatorial candidates had to do the campaign in order to gain people support. Debate is one part of the campaign. The Banten Provincial General Election Commission required that the debate be held and attended by all candidates. This must be done to explore the candidates' intellectual capacity and their vision and mission.

A debate may be examined in a variety of disciplines, including pragmatics. Within pragmatics a debate may also be examined from different points of view, including the theory of speech acts, which was originally developed by Austin (1962). The theory explains how speakers use utterances to perform intended actions and how hearers interpret intended meaning from what is said. As Searle (1969: 42) puts it, "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts". This is to say that there is an act in every communication that people perform.

The present study examines the use of speech acts in the gubernatorial election debates. It focuses on commissive speech acts as one type of speech acts. The problems of the present study are therefore formulated in the following research questions:

1. What commissive speech acts are performed by the candidates in the debate?
2. How is politeness implied in the use of commissive speech acts?

In relation to the research problems above, the present study aims to (1) find the commissive speech acts performed by the candidates in the debate, and (2) examine politeness that is implied in the use of commissive speech acts.

The present study reveals some information regarding the use of commissive speech acts in political domain, especially in gubernatorial election. This concerns how speech acts are used in real life, especially in Indonesian political context. The

findings are expected to contribute to the study of pragmatics in general and of speech acts in particular.

This research is largely qualitative, especially in identifying and classifying the commissive speech acts that appear in the debates. Descriptive quantification, however, is also used to identify the trend in the use of commissive speech acts, and the results are used to make further interpretation of the use of the speech acts, especially with regard to the politeness implication.

The data of the present study are videotaped debates performed by the Banten gubernatorial candidates. The data were collected by downloading the debate sessions organized by Metro TV on October 2011 from [www.Youtube.com](http://www.Youtube.com). Several steps were taken to analyze the data from the transcription. To answer the first research question, the commissive speech acts were identified and classified based on the speech acts theory developed by Searle (1979) and Yule (2000). For this purpose some illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) were examined, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Commissive speech act and its characteristics

No.	Commissive speech acts	IFID
1.	Promise	Performative verb: promise Force: there is an intention which gives benefit to the hearer.
2.	Guarantee	Performative verb: guarantee Force: the speaker affirms constative the quality of something.
3.	Refusal	Performative verb: refuse Force: there is a negation
4.	Threat	Force: There is an intention from the speaker to give harm or gives no benefit to the hearer.

5.	Volunteer	Performative verb: volunteer Force: when speaker offers his services.
6.	Offer	Performative verb: offer Force: when the speaker offer something to the hearer.

After the utterances had been classified into types of commissive speech acts, the occurrences of the speech acts were calculated to find their percentage. This quantification was made in order to examine the second research problem, i.e. the implication of politeness in the use of commissive speech acts.

Theoretically, speech act concerns how an act is performed by means of language. Speech act is best defined as “in saying something, we do something” (Austin, 1962: 12). Searle further systematizes five speech act categories that are still relevant to the Austin’s theory as the result of the revision. They are assertive, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. (Hassell et al., 2011).

Austin (1975: 14) argued that for a speech act to be considered valid, four kinds of felicity conditions must be met. They are preparatory conditions, executive condition, sincerity condition and essential condition. Preparatory condition establishes the circumstances of the speech act and the participant in it. It includes factors such as the status or authority of the speaker to perform the speech act and the situation of other parties. Executive condition determines whether the speech act has been properly executed or not. Sincerity condition concerns whether the speaker actually intends what he or she says. Like in the case for apologizing or promising, it is often impossible for others to determine whether or not sincerity conditions are fulfilled (Thomas, 1995). However, there are some speech acts

where this sincerity is determined by the presence of witnesses, such as in a contract, because one or more of the parties cannot later claim that they did not really mean it. Essential condition implies the intention to create an obligation. For example, the expression “I promise” in a promise changes the status from non-obligation to obligation.

These four conditions need to be fulfilled in order for a speech act to have an effect. If all the relevant felicity conditions were satisfied for a given illocutionary act, Austin described it as ‘happy’ or ‘felicitous’. If it does not fulfill the four requirements, the statement can be false or infelicitous.

Commissives are those kinds of speech acts that speaker use to commit themselves to some future action. They express speaker’s intention. They are promises, threats, refusals, and pledges, and they can be performed by the speaker alone or by the speaker as a member of a group. “In using a commissives, the speaker undertakes to make the world fit the words (via the speaker)” (Yule, 1996: 54). When

people perform commissives, they may say their speech by using the performative verbs such as promise, swear, guarantee, and vow.

As stated previously that commissives are differentiated into some types, i.e. promise, guarantee, refusal, threat, volunteer, and offer. Promise is a statement of telling someone that you will definitely do or not do something. It is a verbal commitment by one person to another to do (or not to do) something in the future. Searle (1975 in Nadar, 2009) proposes five requirements to make a valid promise speech act.

First, the speaker has to intend to do what he promises, then the speaker must believe (that the hearer believes) that the action is in the hearer’s best interest, the speaker has to believe that he can perform the action; the speaker must predicate a future action, and the speaker has to predicate an act of himself.

Searle (1975 in Nadar, 2009: 88)

A guarantee is a firm promise that you will do something or that something will happen. It is a pledge that something will happen or that something is true. The degree of affirmation is the tool to differentiate guarantee from promise.

Refusals are negative responses to invitations, requests, offers, suggestions, and the like which are frequently used in our daily lives (Sadler & Eroz, 2001 in Ghazanfari, 2012). Saying “no” is somehow more vital than the answer itself. Both speaker and interlocutors are expected to understand the context as well as form and function of refusal, depending on the cultural linguistic and ethnicity values.

Threat is a statement of an intention to punish or harm somebody. It means to give intimidation to the hearer, if the hearer does not want to do the speaker’s command. Threat is commonly motivated by hatred and distrustful of the speaker to the hearer in which the speaker feels that someone has higher power to

intimidate the hearer via his utterance.

Volunteer is defined as offer to do something without being forced or paid to do it. It is to perform or offer to perform a service of someone’s own free will. It means choosing to offer or give freely without being asked or obliged.

Offer means saying that you are willing to do something for somebody or give something to somebody. Offer is the hearer’s expression to offer an act for the hearer’s or addressee’s interest.

The use of commissive speech act can be analyzed more by using politeness theory. Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is believed as the most influential by focusing on the face and rationality. They claim the Goffman’s notion of face as a universal feature that is possessed by all human beings and widely comparable to self-esteem. The principle and operation are cross culturally constant and universally valid (Eelen, 2001). Goffman (1967)

stated that face can be lost, maintained and enhanced.

Having consciousness of social status or position, age and gender in society is important as well as having knowledge and contribution of how we should behave socially appropriately in a given situation. There are three factors which influence politeness according to Brown and Levinson (1987), i.e power, social relation and degree of imposition. First factor is power. People tend to be more polite when they speak to a person who has a higher power. "We tend to use a greater degree of indirectness with people who have some power or authority over us than those who do not" (Thomas, 1995: 14). Second factor of politeness is Social distance. Social distance is best described as composite of

psychologically real factors (status, sex, age, degree of intimacy) which together determine the overall degree of intimacy and closeness (Thomas, 1995). This is to say that if a person feels close to someone else, because that someone is related to that person, or in similar terms of sex, occupation, social class and ethnicity, the person feel less need to employ indirectness and less using politeness. And the last factor is degree of imposition which is best defined as how great is the request made.

Brown and Levinson suggest that "the seriousness or weightiness of a face-threatening act is a combination of the social distance between speaker and hearer, the power differential between the hearer and speaker, and the ranking of impositions".

$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$ , where  $x$  is the face threatening act.

However, there are some critics given to Brown and Levinson theory. For Watts (2003: 96), power is underspecified in Brown and Levinson. He suggests that their

equation that "the seriousness or weightiness of a face-threatening act is a combination of the social distance between speaker and hearer, the power differential between the

hearer and speaker, and the ranking of impositions”.

There is a scala which measures it. “The formula assumes that each of the three independent variables runs on a scalar basis from 1 to  $n$ , with  $n$  being a relatively small number between 1 and 7” (Aziz, 2000: 70). First factor is measured from the weight of social distance between variable. The factors which dominated the social distance are wealth, official, positions. The research recognizes three categories of social distance, namely *close*, *casual* and *distant*, which will be assigned the values 1, 2, and 3.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Searle (1967), there are six categories of commissive speech acts, i.e. promise, guarantee, refusal, threat, offer, and volunteer. Based on the analysis, the most frequently occurring commissive speech act is guarantee. Through this speech act each candidate reveals his or her vision and mission and also action that will be taken if he or she is to be elected

The next factor that will be measured is the power. The relative power possessed by a speaker which enables him/her to control a hearer’s behavior will determine the value of the P (H,S) variable. If the speaker has more power to exercise on the hearer, then he/she is said to be in power and be given the value 1. In contrast, if the speaker is of equal or less power, then he/she will be assigned the values 0 or -1 respectively. (Aziz, 2000: 70)

The third factor that will be measured is the degree of imposition. According to Azis, there are low, mid and high that is taken into a scala 1, 2, and 3.

the new Banten governor. As shown in Table 2, guarantee occurs 29 times (53.7%), followed by promise with 21 occurrences (38.9%), and refusal with four occurrences (7.3%). Meanwhile, threat, volunteer and offer are not evidenced.

Guarantee is mostly used by all candidates perhaps because it strongly implies their commitment to the development of the province if they are to be elected governor. By



expressing guarantee, the candidates seem to expect that their utterances would give a strong effect that may

lead the audience (Banten people) to be on their side later in the election.

Table 2: The distribution of commissive speech act categories

No	Commissive speech act	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
1.	Promise	21	38.9	2
2.	Guarantee	29	53.7	1
3.	Refusal	4	7.4	3
4.	Threat	-	-	-
5.	Volunteer	-	-	-
6.	Offer	-	-	-
Total		54	100	

Promise is realized in three strategies. The first strategy of promise which is found in the debate is expressing intention. Here the candidates showed their intention to develop and improve the condition of Banten. The second strategy is offering solution. In this strategy, the candidates are prone to give a better solution to problems that previously occurred in Banten. The last strategy is expressing want. By this strategy, the candidates are stating their want about what Banten future will be like.

Guarantee is realized in three strategies. The first strategy is capability . This is to be done to increase the affirmation of guarantee itself. The second strategy is determination . This guarantee is using determination strategy. In this strategy, the speaker is compelling himself to do the action. The last strategy of guarantee is impediment.

Refusal is realized through four strategies. First is alternative. Here the speaker is stating the alternative of the previous problem. The second strategy is giving a reason in which the speaker is revealing the reasons of the previous argument. The third strategy is saying what is offered is inappropriate. In this strategy, the speaker is openly refuse the offer by saying that it is inappropriate. And the last strategy is direct refusal/

direct no. The speaker is directly saying no or directly refuses the argument.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 70) suggest that “the seriousness or weightiness of a face-threatening act is a combination of the social distance between speaker and hearer, the power differential between the hearer and speaker, and the ranking of impositions”. This is formulates as follows:

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x,$$

In the present study, D refers to the distance (D) among the three candidates and also the panelists, P refers to the power (P) relation between the candidates and the panelists and among candidates, and R refers to value that measures the degree to which the Face Threatening Acts is rated as an imposition.

Regarding the weightiness between the candidates to panelists, the power is given value 1 because the panelists have a higher power than the candidates. The social distance is given value 3 because they are distant and the degree of imposition is high or given value 3 because all the degree of imposition is high.

So, it is found that

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x,$$

$$W = 3+1+3=7$$

This suggests that the weightiness of politeness between candidates and panelist is high. The candidates need to use a very polite utterance when they speak to the panelists.

Regarding the weightiness between the candidates to candidates, the power is given value 0 because

the candidates have the same power than the other candidates. The social distance is given value 3 because they are distant and the degree of imposition is high or given value 3 because all the degree of imposition is high.

So, it is found that

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x,$$

$$W = 3 + 0 + 3$$

$$= 6$$

This suggests that the weightiness of politeness between candidates and panelist is 6 and it is considered high but not higher than the weightiness of candidates to panelist. The candidates need to use a very polite utterance when they speak to the panelists.

It has been found that the use of commissive speech acts is relatively the same across all settings of the debate. This may be supported by the weightiness that is not largely different. This little difference results from the facts that the social distance

and degree of imposition are constant across the settings.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

It is found that commissive speech acts are mostly realized through guarantee (53.7%), followed by promise (38.9%), and refusal (7.4%). Guarantee is mostly used perhaps because it is a very strong statement that can result in positive emotion.

It is also found that in terms of politeness, all the candidates appear to behave in relatively the same way. They have different power, the same distance and imposition but the verbal behavior is still the same. There are two possible reasons for this. First, the weightiness is not largely different. Second, the difference of power in candidate-panelist and candidate-candidate relations seems to be ignored because the candidates saw the panelists and other candidates as media to speak to a party that has the ultimate power in that context: the people of Banten.

Based on the findings above it can be said that politeness operates in the use of language in real life, including the use of commissive speech acts. Power, especially the one owned by the people of Banten, appears to have influenced the linguistic behavior of the candidates. The present study also confirms that pragmatics is a discipline that has the potential to explore social issues. It is a study that can bridge linguistics and other disciplines.

This research focuses on the use of commissive speech acts and its relation to politeness phenomena in the context of Banten gubernatorial candidate debate. Further research may explore the use of other speech acts in political contexts or other contexts. Due to the delimitation, the present study only explores the politeness concern in terms of its aspects and weightiness. Further studies may explore politeness by also examining its strategies.

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